First Things First for Future Defense Strategy

May 27, 2015 | Mr. Nathan P. Freier, Ms. Laura McAleer

The Department of Defense (DoD) will face a dramatic and sustained transition period over the next decade. At no other time in recent memory have American defense strategists faced such a dizzying and complex array of challenges like those which they will be required to direct their attention, energy, and resources toward in the coming years. It is frankly impossible to overstate the scale and complexity of the decisions that they will be required to make. This degree of uncertainty and complexity makes the task of deliberately charting a responsible way ahead that much more difficult and urgent.

In the wake of 15 years of persistent combat operations, senior defense leaders will need to repurpose institutions and capabilities for use against a wider range of 21st century threats and challenges. They will have to do so with fewer aggregate forces and resources, more top-down constraints on their use, less clarity of overall purpose, and no bipartisan consensus on either the most compelling threats or the most appropriate responses to those threats. These factors support calls for top to bottom adaptation within DoD.

Resetting DoD to secure at-risk interests effectively will most certainly require a new set of governing "first principles," since little about the current environment conforms well to the traditional defense playbook. These foundational assumptions will need to focus the enterprise on the most salient and durable characteristics of the decisionmaking and operating environments, while providing a reasoned road map for future requirements, operational priorities, and risk.

One constant amidst the dynamism, volatility, and hazards of the contemporary landscape is a bipartisan commitment to an outward-looking and activist defense of core interests. In all cases, whether or not there is broad agreement on the specifics, that commitment includes an explicit interest in maintaining robust military capabilities that as a rule collectively contribute to conflict prevention, reliable and timely military responses to crises, and durable results across the widest possible range of contingency events. In the end, senior defense leaders want agile military tools at their disposal that demonstrate the requisite competencies and depth of capabilities for assigned missions. They also want some confidence that those tools can deliver on time and at acceptable cost, regardless of operational conditions.

Three tangled, yet distinct, threat vectors make doing this an especially nettlesome challenge. Understanding and socializing these trends within DoD will play an essential role in defining the right first principles for 21st century defense. While precise prediction is a fool's errand in defense planning, these three foundational trends present U.S. defense planners with a reasonable template for future decisionmaking. Albeit imperfect, they may nonetheless be the best available pacers for a risk informed defense strategy.

The first and perhaps most obvious among the vectors is the rise of a militarily capable revisionist power that increasingly presents a credible alternative to U.S. leadership in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. China's provocative regional ambitions increasingly put it at odds with the United States in the vast region stretching from the Indian Ocean through the western Pacific and northeast Asia. Escalating regional tensions put both U.S. partners and fence-sitting third parties in the middle of an uncomfortable tug-of-war between two competing giants. Further, China's distinct interest in actively countering U.S. power projection capabilities hazards triggering a high-end arms race reminiscent of the Cold War. We are entering dangerous times in the western Pacific for sure. Therefore, offsetting increased U.S. vulnerability there is and should remain a high priority for DoD.

Traditional security competition with our likeliest near-peer rival cannot, however, be DoD's only priority effort. A second contemporary threat vector emerges from so-called "gray zone" actors. "Gray zone" competitors employ sophisticated hybrid combinations of capabilities and methods to encroach on important U.S. interests without decisively breaching unmistakable redlines. In short, "gray zone" competitors are skillfully "pushing our buttons" in ways that fail to conform to preferred U.S. military countermeasures.

In Europe, for example, a worrisome unease has settled in. Russia is incrementally advancing an obvious counter-Western agenda, adversely manipulating local political outcomes on its periphery by combining high politics, resource intimidation, political subversion, and proxy conflict. What we do not yet know is whether increased Russian activism is a sign of growing asymmetric strength or profound fear, weakness, and internal fragility. Both scenarios are equally bad.

Likewise, Iran employs its own unique high-low brand of "gray zone" competition as it simultaneously employs legitimate international engagement with harmful regional activism. While it appears to be negotiating a responsible nuclear accord with the P-5+1, it also actively exploits sectarian fissures region-wide through the same brand of subversion, intimidation, and proxy resistance exhibited by the Russians in Europe. Additionally, it has recently engaged in overt harassment of commercial shipping, raising the potential for miscalculation and escalation. Iran's overall regional endgame is somewhat uncertain. However, strengthening its position at the expense of its regional and extra-regional rivals is a reasonable opening hypothesis. The Russian and Iranian brand of hybrid competition defies long-held defense convention and, thus, requires fresh ideas to combat it effectively.

Finally, in a wide swath of the Islamic world stretching through North Africa, across the traditional Middle East, and well into South Asia, we are seeing traditional authority structures disintegrating into violent seizures of civil disorder and conflict. Terrorism is one by-product of this trend. However, terrorism is neither the only nor the most important one. Perhaps more troubling than the pop-up extremism likely to emerge from any revolutionary change in the region is the persistent, contagious, and profoundly disruptive instability within countries and between peoples occurring in its wake. So far, the darkest manifestations of the at-first benign Arab Spring respects neither established political boundaries nor the virtue of deliberate political reform.

Thus, in somewhat rapid order, governments and the governed across the region are increasingly at odds over political primacy in an environment where hyperconnectivity, confessional identity, religious radicalism, and prolific violence have proven bankable currency for greater influence. New sources of extremism and the atomization and proliferation of armed conflict are local symptoms of a broader viral malady that increasingly undermine hopes for a stable transition to a more responsible regional order. Ignoring the potential for the worst security outcomes in the greater Middle East is a luxury DoD can ill-afford, and attention to it will require more creativity than a more robust counterterrorism program.

Each vector by itself harbors significant implications for the defense establishment, and all present immediate, compelling, and persistent dilemmas for DoD strategists. Though each is a distinct and definable challenge now, they are all also emblematic of the worldwide strategic and operational future of DoD. There may, for example, be other great power competitors on the horizon who generate niche asymmetries to limit U.S. freedom of action; time will tell. Further, following the Iranian and Russian lead, new challengers may opt to fight in the "gray," employing ambiguous methods to achieve unambiguous benefits vis-à-vis the United States. Finally, American strategists might be well advised to consider prolific Middle Eastern instability as the leading indicator of systemic and networked resistance to the established order elsewhere.

Any one of these discrete challenges could, through overcommitment, dangerously consume the limited resources that U.S. strategists have at hand. Unfortunately, all of these challenges manifest themselves in knotted combinations that eschew simple categorization and, thus, dim the prospects for "one size fits all" defense optimization. For example, though clearly a traditional military power, China has skillfully entered the "gray zone" in the way it employs resources and capabilities to limit U.S. options. Likewise, while Russia and Iran are pre-disposed to indirect pressure, they possess just enough traditional military capability to threaten unacceptable costs in an open conflict with the United States. Finally, violent devolution in the Middle East occurs alongside old world power politics pitting the United States, Israel, and the Gulf against Iran.

Invariably, planners are likely to get the particulars about future conflict wrong. Further, with new vulnerabilities in space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum, even straight forward defense challenges will manifest in less bounded ways. We can identify, plan for, and build against a divinable set of competing and irreducible macro trends. We suggest DoD start with these three to lay a foundation for a 21st century defense strategy that minimizes the likelihood for disruptive surprise.

*****

*****